CHRISTMAS REALISM

December 31, 1989

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Isaiah 63:7-9
Matthew 2:13-23

"A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children;..." -Matthew 2:18 (RSV)

It's a peculiar time, these days following Christmas. For weeks all roads have led to Bethlehem. In fact, for those of us who live and move and have our being here, on Michigan Avenue, Christmas was coming for months, and for the past month it has been omnipresent, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. And then in the twinkling of an eye it was over. The very day after it's gone: The retailers put out the spring clothes and while the celebrating will linger, it will be with less enthusiasm and anticipation. Even the carols, which continue on the Muzak systems of hotel elevators and department stores, sound less joyful.

Throughout Advent and Christmas I have been using a major piece of poetry, For The Time Being, A Christmas Oratorio, by W. H. Auden, as counterpoint to the traditional Biblical accounts of the nativity. The concluding section, by the narrator, catches the spirit of the peculiar time after Christmas.

"Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes -
Some have got broken - and carrying them up to the atti
The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,
And the children got ready for school.
There are enough
Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week -
Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,
Stayed up so late, attempted - quite unsuccessfully -
To love all of our relatives, and in general
Grossly overestimated our powers, Once again
As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable
Possibility, once again we have sent Him away,
Begging though to remain His disobedient servant,..."

However, before we take the tree down and put away the ornaments; before we dismantle Christmas, aesthetically, emotionally, commercially; there is another small bit of business to attend to. There is a part of the Christmas story we haven't heard yet which makes it difficult, once having heard it, to dismiss the Christ child quite so easily. This part of the story has the hard edge of reality to it. There are no Hallmark cards celebrating it... it is mentioned only in remote and usually very ancient carols. In fact, we don't hear it often and when we do we wish we hadn't. It is not exactly consistent with the love and peace and goodwill, warmth, generosity and sentiment which characterize, exclusively, our celebration of the birth. But it is there, nevertheless, in the second chapter of the Gospel of St. Matthew, right after the visit of the Magi.

It is the story of how the birth of Jesus Christ was received by the political establishment of the day. It is a story of how entrenched political power deals with a new idea: the age-old tragedy of geriatric tyranny doing whatever is necessary to hang on to power. But that gets us ahead of ourselves. Let's just say that Matthew has preserved the story for a reason: that the Christmas story is really not complete without it; that nobody wants to hear it, particularly in that pleasant afterglow of an absolutely lovely Christmas celebration. That includes the world which never even heard of it; the church which tries to ignore it; the people who, on this particular Sunday would like to revisit the manger, or, perhaps, hear from the young people; something light and breezy... The preacher is not crazy about the text either because if we hear it carefully it reminds us of things none of us wants to think about. I looked it up and discovered that I preached on it several times in the first part of my ministry, back when I knew a lot more than I do now. And that the last time was 1970, and in 1970 the story of what Herod did to the innocent children of Bethlehem seemed to me a lot like what we were doing to the children of Vietnam, at Mylai, for instance. So, I've never revisited the text because of the incredible part it evoked and evokes still.

"Herod the Great" was the King. The Herod Dynasty ruled Jewish Palestine from 37 B.C. to 70 A.D. The Herods were Jewish by birth, but not by commitment. Herod the Great, according to Matthew, didn't care much about Judaism although he did rebuild the Jerusalem Temple. Secular history judges that he was an unexceptional king, no worse, no better than most of the monarchs of the day. He was particularly skilled in dealing with the Romans at whose pleasure Herod remained on the throne. He had ten wives and at least fifteen children, a number of whom wanted to be King also. Herod the realist, did what he had to do - executed three of his children and one of his wives. His final years were difficult and bloody, filled with intrigue, assassinations and a diminishment of his popularity. At the end, he was loathed by his own people, so much so that to insure mourning at his funeral Herod left instructions that other notable political figures were to be put to death when he died.

So that's the person - aging, threatened, frustrated, enraged old man - who receives the Magi and hears confirmation of a rumor he's been hearing a lot recently, namely that a new King has been born, a new dynasty to replace his own. What he decides to do when he finds out the location of the birth, is, actually, perfectly consistent with the way he makes

decisions. He is a consummate realist. He orders the death of all the babies in and around Bethlehem under two years of age, which is how long the Magi have been following the star.

W. H. Auden portrays him, not as a tyrant, which is too simple, but a realist... a politician who knows what's what.

"Today, apparently, judging by the trio who came to see me this morning with an ecstatic grin on their scholarly faces, the job has been done. 'God has been born' they cried. 'We have seen him ourselves. The world is saved. Nothing else matters.'

"One needn't be much of a psychologist to realize that if this rumor is not stamped out now, in a few years it is capable of diseasing the entire empire, and one doesn't have to be a prophet to predict the consequences if it should...

"Naturally this cannot be allowed to happen. Civilization must be saved even if it means sending for the military, as I suppose it does. How dreary. Why is it then in the end civilization has to call in these professional tidiers...? O dear, why couldn't this wretched infant be born somewhere else? Why can't people be sensible? I don't want to be horrid. Why can't they see that this notion of a finite God is absurd?"

So, history records that he did it... ordered the death of the babies... the slaughter of the Innocents. In the High Church tradition either the 27th or the 28th of December is Holy Innocents Day, or the Feast of the Holy Innocents. The Middle Ages celebrated it as part of Christmastide, being generally a lot less squeamish about such things, and celebrated them, the babies, the first Christian martyrs. The old Byzantine Liturgy set the number at 14,000. The Syrian Church said there were 64,000. Some have used the cryptic numerology of the Book of Revelation to deduce that Herod killed 144,000. Raymond E. Brown, the definitive New Testament scholar of the Nativity, a Catholic who teaches at Union Seminary in New York City, doing his usual careful research, looks at the population of Bethlehem and the surrounding area and discovers it is less than 1,000; discovers its birth rate and normal infant mortality rate and says there were twenty children under two in Bethlehem.

Of course, the number is not important. One is too many... one child sacrificed because a frustrated old man is scared - one baby napalmed to save a village from Communism - or Anne Frank - one Chinese student - one Romanian child. It is a distressingly familiar dynamic. Who will ever forget what happened outside Philadelphia, Mississippi, when three young civil rights workers were murdered; or on the streets and in the parks of this city in the summer of 1968; or on the campus of Kent State University when the National Guard opened fire on the students? Who will ever forget the reasons the politicians gave for killing our young and the stern response of many that unfortunate as it all was, that's reality, and besides they asked for it? John Bodo suggests that of all the characters in the Nativity, we should recognize and understand Herod most readily.

A friend of mine, Professor Ed Barrett at Muskingum College, was guest professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong this year. On June 1 he was in Beijing. He wrote a very moving account of what he witnessed for a journal, (Theology Today, October 1989), under the title Beijing and Bethlehem. He was there when the thirty-foot-high plaster and styrofoam "Goddess of Democracy" appeared on Tiananmen Square, saw the students gathering, heard the speeches, visited in the apartments of university professors sympathetic to the students, saw the citizens of Beijing persuade the soldiers not to move against the students and, then, was at his hotel window at 11:30 p.m. when the tanks, armored personnel carriers and trucks moved in, listened to gunfire, heard sirens. The next day Ed and his party found the taxi driver who had been transporting them and relates how the taxi driver, weeping, told him "the tanks ran over our children." Ed Barrett comments, "Herod of Jerusalem would have felt at home in Beijing."

Both the student guides who had been working with his group were shot. One died. And Barrett tells how the Molotov cocktails which Chinese television said were thrown by rabble rousers and then used as a pretext for the slaughter, were actually thrown by the people of Beijing at the army - enraged at the murder of their children.

Barnett's summary is powerful. "The pattern of Herod's slaughter of the Innocents became reincarnate - this time in 20th century history. Deng Xiaoping, an old man clearly in physical, mental and political decline (as was Herod) was troubled and all the city with him. Fearing that the 'mandate of heaven' was about to be granted to a younger generation, he consulted with his advisers and decided on death and deceit. There was, of course, no threat to the stability of China, only to the reputation and authority of its leaders."

Well, one of the lessons we can learn from this distressing story is that birth is always a struggle; that there is pain and agony and always the possibility of death as birth is happening - the birth of a child, the birth of a new idea, the rebirth of a culture, the birth of freedom, the birth of a nation, the birth of God. [See Edmund Steimle, The Beating of Unseen Wings, Birth and Martyrdom] One of the lessons we can learn is that where the new appears you can count on the old to put up a fight and not to give in without a struggle.

Another lesson is that sooner or later people in power begin to think that their exercise of power is ordained by God, or fate, or determined by the dialectic and, therefore, it is legitimate to do whatever is necessary to stay in control. The sad spectacle of China, Romania, El Salvador, Panama, for instance.

The third lesson is that God is on the side of the new, even though you can count on the old to wrap itself in the cloak of piety, religion and patriotism, the flag, law and order, and tradition in order to defend itself. Not that every new idea is a good one - or that tradition is always bad - but watch, St. Matthew says, for God in the new, in the young, in the brave challenges of young people in every culture and generation, to established procedures, in the insistent questions, or the courageous insistence of the young that there are always better ways of doing things

and a better world of justice, kindness, equality - worth working for, striving for, fighting and dying for... count on God to be in that insistent dynamic.

There is, of course, an even more perplexing issue and that is the whole matter of God's relationship to events like the death of innocent children. The sound of Rachel weeping was heard in the land, Matthew tells us - Rachel weeping for her children who centuries before were hauled off into exile. And so, for illumination I turned to one of my favorites, a wise theologian who happens also to be a mother and grandmother, Madeline L'Engle. Not surprisingly, L'Engle has written about it with great honesty.

"This is a festival? This remembering the slaughter of all those babies - whose only wrong was to have been born at the wrong time?" [The Irrational Season, p. 28]

So let Rachel's weeping stand for all the mothers who have wept over the unnecessary deaths of their children.

The sound of Rachel weeping is still heard in the land...

-in the weeping of the Romanian mother leaning over her ten-year-old son's coffin,

-in the weeping of the Hispanic mother whose Marine son was killed in Panama,

-in the weeping of the Afro-American mother whose teen-age daughter was killed in a project last week by a stray bullet from a gang skirmish over drug territory,

-in the weeping of the mother of a fireman, who died crawling through the burning church building last week, looking for people who might have been trapped.

That weeping is one of the most insistent sounds in human history and Matthew knows it and tells about it because he knows it represents the most profound theological issue of all... What kind of love - what kind of God allows that weeping?

Matthew includes this incident as part of the birth narrative intentionally, I believe, to keep us from missing the point in the midst of the sentiment the birth evokes. The point is that God so loves the world that God becomes subject to the same suffering, pain, the same unnecessary dying of Innocents. God shares it. God has become part of this world. The prophet Isaiah, writing centuries before the birth, anticipates it.

"I will recount the steadfast love of
the Lord...

"In all their affliction he was afflicted...
and the angel of his presence saved them."

The birth of this child means something almost indescribable... "Emmanuel" - God is with us. There is nothing that can happen to us - nothing - which God does not experience too. And that makes all the difference. "The angel of God's presence saves us."

Thirty-three years later, this child, now a young man, will die because another set of rulers are frightened to death of a new idea... but in that dying, you and I will see again how deeply and profoundly God is in this life with us: not only how God sides with the new emerging out of the old, but also something powerfully persuasive - namely how knowing that we are never and will never be alone. Knowing that - knowing that God lives our life and dies our death - will save us, too.

My friend, Ed Barrett, asked it about Tiananmen Square, "What is God doing in this situation?" and answered, "Suffering, of course. But that is nothing new. The lamb is at the center of the universe."

And so - because of this birth and, particularly this hard, realistic but very precious part of the story - you and I know again that God is with us and will be with us.

Madeline L'Engle says that Jesus was particularly loving and gentle with children because he knew about the Holy Innocents, the ones who died because of his birth, and that when he went to heaven he hurried past Moses and Elijah and Abraham and found them. I think she's right.

Well... so that is that, now we must dismantle the tree... take down the garlands and banners.

But near the end of the Christmas Oratorio, W. H. Auden pushes us forward...

"The Christmas feast is already a fading memory
And already the mind begins to be
vaguely aware
of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension
at the thought
of Lent and Good Friday which
cannot, after all, now
Be very far off."

The challenge is to bring the lovely celebration with us as we move ahead - into a new year - a new decade - into a world that is very real... a sometimes lovely world but also tragic world where people are stricken with premature illness, where innocent children suffer, where everything doesn't always go the way we planned... where dreams have to be altered and laid to rest.

The good news of Christmas is that God dearly loves this world, and lives in it with us and will walk shoulder to shoulder into the future, will hold us up, encourage us, give us strength, and that nothing that can happen to us will ever separate us from that love which we first saw at a manger.

So we are invited, finally, not simply to look backward in nostalgia, but to live faithfully, joyfully, courageously in the future.

W. H. Auden closes the Christmas Oratorio with that in mind:

"The happy morn is over,
the night of agony still to come..."
He is the Way...
He is the Truth..
He is the Life...
Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;
You will see rare beasts and have unique
adventures."

Amen.

O God of love, be with us now in days ahead as we live out of this love we have witnessed and celebrated and experienced in Bethlehem. Be with us and make us your faithful people, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.